

Last Hope (A Hitman Novel)

By Jessica Clare, Jen Frederick

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In the explosive new Hitman novel from the bestselling authors of *Last Kiss* and *Last Hit a* jungle mercenary and a female target find love on the run...
Mendoza: I grew up in the slums and lost everything I loved to poverty, illness, and death. I had only one skill to leverage myself out of my circumstances—violence. Being hired out as a mercenary hitman brought me money and built an empire. But all that I've fought for is in jeopardy. My next job: Steal secret information that could bring down world governments. Find my target. Destroy it. But then, I meet her.
Ava: Karma hates me. When my best friend Rose is kidnapped, I have no choice but to take a job as a mule for a pair of criminals intent on selling top-secret information to the highest bidder. I should have known that bad luck tends to cling, because the plane I'm on goes down. That I survived a crash-landing was a miracle. And so was being rescued by Rafe Mendoza—hot, sexy, dangerous. The thing is, he wants the information that I need to free Rose. I can't let him have it, but I need his help. And I need to fight this crazy attraction for this mercenary with hungry eyes. Rose is depending on me, and I won't let her down, no matter how appealing Rafe is.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the Hitman novels

“Sexy, thrilling romantic suspense.”—*Smexy Books*

“A phenomenal book that sticks with you.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Sara Fawkes

“Everything you could ask for.”—*All Romance Reviews*

About the Author
Jessica Clare is the New York Times bestselling author of the Billionaire Boys Club novels and the Bluebonnet novels. **Jen Frederick** is the USA Today bestselling author of the Woodlands series. Together they write the Hitman series which includes Last Kiss, Last Hit: Reloaded, Last Breath, and Last Hit.

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“Jessica Clare and Jen Frederick are a force to be reckoned with!”*

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CHAPTER ONE

RAFAEL

“How come it’s always the pretty ones that end up working for these fuckups?” Bennito Vasquez is twenty-five years old. He has a head full of dark curls and no problems with the ladies but he still takes it as a personal insult when there is a beautiful woman out of his reach, and they don’t get more inaccessible than Ava Samson.

“Because they’re dumb.” This conclusion is from Rodrigo. At thirty-two he’s practically the old man of our group. But they all look up to me, which makes me feel far older than my thirty-five years of age.

“She’s not dumb,” Garcia mutters. He’s my right-hand man. We’ve been through hell and more hell together.

Heaven is always two steps ahead of us and just out of reach. Miss Ava is heaven and sex wrapped up into one tempting package. Any man with a pulse has thought about what it would be like to climb into bed with Ava and get lost in her big eyes and tangled up in her dark brown hair.

“If she had any brains, she’d have stayed away from Louis Duval and his crew. Instead, she’s sitting in a hotel in Lima with an ugly purse in her lap. That spells dumber than a box of rocks,” Bennito declares.

Garcia shakes his head in disagreement. “She’s smart. Look at how she acts. She knows she’s being watched because she undresses under the covers. She sleeps close to an escape route but has her head toward the door to watch for intruders. Those are better preservation instincts than ninety-five percent of the population.”

“Why doesn’t she ditch the bag? I’d pitch that sucker and be out of that room in a heartbeat.”

“It’s clear there’s something important there and she can’t,” Garcia replies with annoyance.

Garcia is right. Ava’s smart. When she arrived at the hotel, she looked for listening devices, cameras, sensors. She found a couple of them but not all. Devices are so tiny these days that it takes an electronic sweep to discover all of them and even then some can be missed.

“Still . . . why’d she even come here with Duval?” Bennito asks sourly. He knows it all—or at least thinks he does.

“Because of Rose.” I break my silence with a concept that Bennito can understand. “She’s there because of her friend . . . her family.”

The lightbulb turns on for him. Bennito’s research for this current mission resulted in thousands of pictures of Rose Waverly aka Rose Wastkowski. Currently a middle-tier runway model, Rose has social media accounts filled with photos of her lying on the beach, out in nightclubs, and more recently, on the arm of Louis Duval. Duval is a French businessman who makes most of his money on the black market selling

information. He has a fondness for blond models and Burgundy wine. His one true love is money.

Of Ava, Bennito found almost nothing. At the age of eighteen, she moved to New York City with Rose. There are no Internet hits with pictures of Ava, and her background check revealed a shared lease with Rose, two credit cards with low balances, and a modest checking account. Her parents are still alive but their connection seems tenuous. There are no phone calls or emails or text messages exchanged between them.

After reading the one-page dossier on Ava that Bennito had compiled, it was clear to me that Rose is not only her friend, but the only person in the world Ava has to call her own.

All of us standing in this room can understand Ava's desire to save her friend because that's why we're here. One of our own is being held as ransom. Our charge is to steal whatever it is that Louis Duval is trying to sell to various criminal factions. If we do that, we get Davidson back. If we fail, Davidson dies.

"Every one of us would strap dynamite to our bodies if we thought it'd save Davidson," I say quietly. "Stupid or not, we'd do it just like Ava's willing to do whatever it takes to keep Rose safe."

Chastened, Bennito returns to his duties. Despite his brash words and lack of thinking, he's a good kid with a gift for coding and computers. He has a feel for it that can't be taught. I pulled him out from under a prosecution in the United States after he'd hacked into a big computer website to impress a girl. Now he does more productive things that are far more dangerous.

But we back him.

Because that's how family works. Bennito is part of our brotherhood, the one Davidson, Garcia, and I formed when we realized that only by relying on each other would we survive the hell that the army was putting us through.

The smart thing for Ava to do would have been to walk away. When she came home with her arms full of groceries and saw Duval and one of his goons sitting in her small apartment instead of Rose, she should have dropped her bags and ran. Instead, she marched in and placed her bags on the counter and demanded to know what was going on.

Duval told her, quietly, that she was to help Rose carry out a task or Rose would be hurt. Ava resisted at first. Which is smart.

But then Duval pulled out his phone, swiped his finger through a few pictures that our secretly placed cameras couldn't pick up, and things got real quiet. Next thing we knew, Duval was telling Ava that she needed to fly to Lima. And Ava?

Ava packed her bag and went.

• • •

In the seven days she's been here in Lima, she's had one visitor—Redoine Fouquet. Fouquet is rumored to be Louis Duval's younger brother. Whatever family resemblance there once was has been eliminated by countless plastic surgeries as both Duval and Fouquet attempt to evade the law.

No, Ava wasn't dumb. Whatever her mistakes are, I don't think lack of intelligence is one of them. She's beautiful. That can often be a problem. Maybe she's too trusting or too kind but not dumb.

I walk over to the floor-to-ceiling windows in our hotel and look across the way at Ava's room. Clad in a

tank top and yoga pants, she climbs into bed. The other men crowd around the table of monitors to watch. I fist my hands in my pocket.

I hate that they watch her.

I hate that she's in danger.

And most of all I hate that I care.

When Norse, the fifth man of my detail arrives, I tear myself away from the window and from Ava. "What's happening?"

"The object, whatever it is, is up for auction. It will close in forty-eight hours." Norse runs a hand over his shorn hair. It's winter in Lima, which in most places means cold. Here it means wet, humid, and foggy. Norse's cotton shirt is plastered against his chest. As he unbuttons it, Garcia throws him a replacement T-shirt.

Garcia was a sergeant in the army, responsible for making sure that the troops were all properly outfitted and armed. A good sergeant can mean the difference between everyone getting out with all their limbs attached and some newbie losing his toes to gangrene. Garcia was the best that there was. Now he's mine because the army doesn't handle its toys well.

They spend hundreds of thousands of dollars training them, making them into cold, unfeeling machines, but they lose interest in the older soldiers because they have this never-ending flood of new recruits. The nonstop supply makes us all disposable. Use them up and toss them out was the unstated motto. I've been gathering up the army's trash for the last ten years or so. Norse, Garcia, Davidson—all army discards. We take our skills and guns and hire them out. Ironically, the U.S. government is one of our best customers.

Except this time, our payment for a completed mission is Davidson.

"Do we know who the buyers are?"

"Two bids—one from North Korea and one from Libya."

"There'll be more," Garcia says.

I nod. There will be many more because what is being sold are secrets. Secrets big enough that the government felt compelled to kidnap and hold hostage one of my own instead of offering money.

Would we have taken the mission if there was only money on the other end? Probably. The mercenary jobs my men and I carry out are lucrative but not to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. That's what Duval's auction will command. It would take us ten years of killing high-priced targets to be able to play in Duval's pool.

"Ava has a visitor!" Bennito calls out.

We all rush to the monitor bank. The left one shows her rising from her bed. She is nearly fully clothed. About the only thing she doesn't wear to bed are her shoes. Sometimes during the day she will wear a belt and before bed will remove it.

She slips on her shoes—another sign of her intelligence. She won't be caught barefoot by a surprise guest. The door opens to reveal Fouquet. He speaks rapidly, backing her into the room and then slamming the door

shut behind him. He has a hand around her wrist. Ava shakes her head and gestures at the ever-present purse. Fouquet raises a hand and Ava flinches back.

A low rumble sounds in my throat and I'm halfway to the door when Garcia grabs me. "Don't do it."

"I'm not going to stand here and watch her get beat by that fuckstick Fouquet," I growl.

"And if you go busting over there, then what? What happens to the auction? What happens to *Davidson*?"

Over Garcia's shoulder I see the men all standing and watching. Bennito looks frightened and Norse and Rodrigo resigned as if they knew the life that they were building was too good to be true for men like them. Killers. Forgotten. The refuse of humanity.

I wipe a hand down my face. Responsibility for them all weighs heavily but it's a burden I gladly carry. This is my family now. These men would die for me and I'm not going to put them in harm's way for a woman—not even one as smart, clever, and beautiful as Ava Samson. Because really, what would be the use? My fantasies about Ava are just that—fantasies. No woman would touch me. No woman would have me. Especially not one as fine as her.

And even if she did, I'd have to turn her away.

I give Garcia an abrupt nod and turn away from the door.

"Update?" I ask Bennito.

"Yeah, um, Fouquet left. He didn't hit her . . . hard. It was more like a love tap." He tries to smile but it fades quickly when none of us laugh. No one here is on board with a woman getting struck—ever. "Okay, yeah he hit her like a fucking asshole and she's in the kitchen putting ice on it."

He slumps into his chair. The tension is high in the room as Fouquet is still present. I imagine he was telling her that the sale was going to happen and what her next tasks are.

"We need sound," I say for the hundredth time. Ordinarily we'd get sound but there's a low constant hum that interferes with any vocal noise. Duval has something inside the hotel room that blocks any radio frequency collectors. "Norse, you and Bennito keep track of the bids. Rodrigo and Garcia, I want you to start tailing Fouquet. He's fresh from a two-year prison sentence. No doubt he's fucking his way across Lima. Since he hasn't raped Ava yet, we can only presume that his brother is keeping him away for some reason."

"What will you be doing?" Garcia asks.

By his grim, unhappy tone, it's clear he already knows but for the benefit of everyone else in the room, I answer. "I'm going to find out what's in that bag of hers."

He follows me out into the hallway. "You like her."

"She's beautiful. Who wouldn't like her?" I walk down the hallway, the dingy wall sconces leaving deep shadows on the purple and green carpet. Garcia follows.

"It is more than that." His dark gaze is searching. I tug my ball cap lower, unwilling to confirm his suspicions. "You think she's brave, loyal."

"And?" My tone is impatient, signaling he should move off this topic.

“Just remember why we are here,” he cautions. We stop at the elevator bank and I press the down button.

“I haven’t forgotten.” Are any of the four elevators going to stop on this floor? I jab the button again. Huffing out a sigh, I respond because Garcia and I go way back and he doesn’t deserve a shitty rebuff. “How many people would put themselves in danger for someone else? Even someone that they love? Not everyone. Most people in Ava’s situation would get the hell out of Dodge and never look back.”

“Most people are smart,” he counters. “Fight or flight, most people are choosing the flight option. Those who run today, live to fight again.”

“But not Ava,” I say quietly. The doors to an elevator slide open. I step in but turn around to face one of my oldest friends. “I know I’m cursed, but shit man, so long as I don’t touch, who the hell is going to blame me for looking?” I give him a crooked smile and as the doors slide shut, I see a reluctant grin break out in return. I don’t have any plans to lay my hands on Ava Samson but damn if I’m not going to try to get close enough to see her smile at me.

CHAPTER TWO

AVA

Lima. The city of contrasts. Golf courses in the middle of the city and businessmen surfing before breakfast.

For me? It’s a crapfest city of jerks that like to hit and threaten women.

I rub my jaw, still feeling the sting of the slap. It’s not the first hit I’ve gotten from one of Duval’s men, and it won’t be the last. I want to fight back. I want to take the small plastic knives in the kitchenette of the hotel room, sharpen one into a shiv, and stab the bastard the next time he touches me.

I won’t, of course. But I entertain the thought all the same.

The Louis Vuitton purse on the bed taunts me. It’s a really nice purse. Leather, with the brown and gold monogrammed LV logo. I’d have loved to own one, once upon a time. This one was gifted to me, and I wish it wasn’t here.

Because what’s inside it is incredibly dangerous. I have to take it everywhere with me. It’s in the bathroom when I shower. It goes with me when I go down the street for snacks. I can’t let it out of my sight, or Rose is dead. That’s been hammered into my head over and over again—I must not let the purse out of my sight, or my friend is dead.

Like I’m not already scared out of my mind.

I clutch the purse against my breast and move to one of the windows of the hotel room. I don’t open the blinds. For all I know, Duval’s got someone watching me out there, and I hate that thought. I do lift one slat with my index finger, just enough to glimpse at the world outside.

People walk the streets, laughing and smiling. I can see their faces even from my vantage point three floors up in the Inka Frog hotel. I see small cars squeezing past the narrow streets, and bicycles weaving between them. I see others shopping down the Calle Enrique Palacios, pausing by the vendor carts that scatter the street. There’s a beat-up taxi pulling up to the curb. It’s all very normal.

So idyllic. So incredibly misleading.

Maybe a month ago I'd have seen people clutching drinks and chatting on street corners. Moms herding children. Harmless people. Now? I see people lingering, watching passersby. I see men with jackets that could conceal guns. I see too many places that could hide someone waiting to kill me.

Sometimes I think my best friend Rose is the lucky one. She's the reason I'm so mired in this mess.

Rose and I have been friends since childhood. It's Rose that's been at my side since I was a young grade-school misfit. It's Rose that suggested I come to New York with her when I graduated from high school and didn't know what to do with myself. It's Rose that got me work when we both arrived in the city, fresh-faced and eager. She's a regular model; I'm a hand model because my mismatched eyes are pronounced "too weird" and my face isn't quite pretty enough even with contacts in. Rose is stunning, of course. Tall, thin, willowy, she's perfect.

She has shit taste in men, though.

She's been dating some dangerous French guy called Louis Duval for the last few weeks. Every time I went home, he was there, and I don't like the look in his eyes. Rose always laughed at my worries and said that he's harmless for girls like us. There's that whole implication that he's not harmless to other people, and I should have said something about it.

But I didn't. I stuck my head in the sand and went on with my life. And that, it turns out, was a lie. All of Louis Duval's words were lies.

Being a hand (and occasionally foot) model is all about hustling and taking small and strange jobs as they come in. Can I hold this banana for six hours while someone does a time-lapse photo shoot? Sure. Can I get a pedicure on camera for an instructional video? Sure. It's bizarre work but it's interesting, and it pays the bills. Rose does traditional modeling—runway, print work, you name it. She parties with high-end people and lives a faster lifestyle than me.

I just hold a banana for six hours and try not to twitch.

The truth is I'm in this gig because of Rose. It's not like banana holding was my dream career. I do it because it pays money and Rose lines up jobs for me with ease. Rose is always there to make stuff easier for me, and I do my part to make life easier for her. Since I'm not a runway model, I'm the unofficial "den mother" to all these models who are, for the most part, focused on their next job and forget to eat (although that may be on purpose), sleep, and live on cigarettes and rice cakes. Someone needs to buy them tampons, keep track of their schedules, and make sure the apartment's stocked up on coffee and salad.

I enjoy doing that—almost more than I enjoy holding a piece of fruit or rubbing lotion on my hands for five hours.

So Rose and I, we're a matched set, friends despite our differences. Polar opposites, yes, but we get along great. Always have, always will. It doesn't matter that Rose is glamorous and I'm a shut-in. We work, we go to clubs together, we share shoes, accessories, and nail polish. We're closer than sisters. Closer than family.

A week ago, though, Rose's lifestyle caught up with her. I came home to find that Rose wasn't in the apartment. In fact, she wasn't anywhere. Her boyfriend Duval was waiting for me, and he'd taken Rose away.

Turns out he's not a businessman, or at least not a legitimate one, because what legitimate businessman makes a girl courier information? His smooth-talking ways are a lie, and he's a drug runner who's hit a rough patch . . . and he needs help.

Because this time? He's not running drugs, and it seems he's in way over his head.

This is where I come in, he tells me.

My task unfolds. I'm to arrive in Lima at a small, unassuming hotel in the Miraflores District. There, I'm going to meet men. Several men.

My job? Well, I'm going to be a hand model of sorts. I'm going to Vanna White it up around the city. I'll be given a purse full of information that I'm to show the buyers. I'm to chat with them and show them samples of the goods that Duval has for sale. We're going to meet in coffee shops and have a drink like it's no big deal, and then I'm going to walk away, head back to my hotel, and wait for the next buyer.

Once the sale is completed, Rose will be released. We'll be free.

And if I don't do what he says, he's going to kill Rose.

I don't believe him at first. Who would? He's bluffing. Rose is his girlfriend. He wouldn't hurt her.

He must have anticipated my disbelief, because he holds his phone out to me. Puzzled, I take it and swipe my finger over the screen, unlocking it. A photo of Rose, bound and gagged and blindfolded and tied to a bed meets my gaze. I swipe over, horrified, and there are more pictures of her. Her body's covered in bruises, her hands cuffed behind her back.

"She thinks it's love play," he murmurs. "It can change so quickly. You should ask my last girlfriend."

And he nods at the phone again.

A sick roiling in my stomach, I go to the photo albums. I notice the one with Rose is flagged as "yesterday," which makes me sick. Yesterday, I was holding a shoe for a photo shoot and Rose didn't come home. I'd thought she was out partying with some of her runway companions after her last shoot.

I'm a horrible friend.

In a photo album from last month, there are pictures of another girl. Bound. Gagged. Pretty and blond, like Rose.

Then, there are more pictures . . . of her death. Of her sucking on the barrel of a gun and licking a knife. Then, of men doing things to her with the weapons. I suck in a breath, fighting the urge to vomit, and hand the phone back.

I don't want to see any more.

"What do you need me to do?" I tell him, and I'm in. Just like that.

He tells me not to worry. That if we're both "good girls," we'll be set free.

It's bullshit.

I know it's all bullshit and they're probably going to kill both of us, but I don't have options. No one will tell me where Rose is. Louis has her and he won't release her until he's sold that information.

It doesn't matter that Rose has been dating him for the last month. It's just business, he says. He'd hate to do something to her, so I'd better keep in line and do as he asks.

I do ask why me. I don't know anything about information smuggling, or Lima, or heck, I don't even know Louis Duval that well.

That's precisely why he wants me handling it. I alone can be trusted because I have sufficient incentive to keep me in line.

So off I go to Lima, to meet up with a man who might or might not be named Fouquet.

I contemplate going to the police, but I feel trapped. I can tell them that Rose has been dating a guy who is French (except not) named Duval (except probably not) and that she's missing. And by the time someone does something, I'm afraid my trusting, reckless friend will be long dead.

Because I think of the girl in the pictures, the one licking the knife that was later used on her. Did she have a friend that failed?

I won't fail Rose. I can't. And it keeps me in line. It stops me from going to the police, from screaming for help at the airport as I fly from New York City to Lima.

Once in Lima, I get a room at the hotel that Duval directed me to. They're expecting me and have a second-floor room reserved under the name Lucy Wessex. Once I check in, I find someone else has a keycard for Lucy Wessex's hotel room.

It's Fouquet.

I hate the man. He's vulgar and filthy and thinks I'm there in Lima as his plaything. Or at least, he did until he got a good look at my mismatched eyes without my contacts. Then, he changed. Now, I'm a demon, a succubus here to steal his soul.

Whatever, dude. I just want my friend back.

Me being a succubus doesn't mean he's not an asshole, though. He still tries to squeeze my tits and feel my ass, telling me that it's because I'm a succubus and I'm luring him. And when I make it clear I'm not interested in the tit squeezes he keeps trying to give me, he turns to slapping. I'm a hand model, so what's my face matter, right?

Fouquet's the one that shows up with the details of my first job and gives me the handbag, along with instructions to never, ever lose it. Whatever Duval is selling isn't in the purse, of course. Instead, I have folders of information. On each day, I'm to go to a random location in Lima with my purse, meet a man who will tell me a color. I pull out that color folder and hand it over. I wait while they read it and then hand it back to me.

Then, I turn around and walk back to my room and wait for further instructions.

So far, two days have passed. I have five folders. I have met yellow and green, both men with cold, dead eyes. Red, blue, and black are still waiting.

If I do not do as Fouquet asks, I am told that Rose will die, and it won't be quick or pretty.

It's not something I want to call a bluff on. I have to do this. I have to save her. So I'm the good little mule and never say a peep that I'm terrified or want out.

I let the blind fall back down and gaze around the room. As has become my habit, I move to the lamps and run my hand along the underside of the shade. I brush my fingers over the phone, then under it. I unscrew the receiver and put it back together. I drag my fingers over the edges of every hard surface. I'm looking for bugs. Not the kind that crawl (I wish) but the kind that listen in on conversations.

My room isn't safe. I have no hope as long as they can hear everything I say. I have to find all the bugs.

And then I have to find someone to help me. I don't know how that's possible, though, given I can trust no one.

I have to do something, though. I know once this purse is gone and the information sold, I'm dead. I know once the sale has gone through, I'm no longer useful.

I have three days—three colors—to think of something. Two, actually, because I need to go to a café and meet Red today in about an hour.

With a small sigh, I tug my sleeve down over my newest bruises, check my hair in the mirror, and then I'm ready to go.

Almost.

I shut the bathroom door and glance at my watch. They won't let me have a cell phone, so I have to have a way to check time and they gave me a cheap, tacky pink watch. I have an hour and the café is only five minutes away. I have time to burn. So much time. It's driving me crazy, all this time.

I lock the bathroom door and run my fingers all along the sink and under it, then check the lip of the tub and even in the faucets. I find a tiny listening device hidden under one of the faucets and smash it, then flush it down the toilet. When I don't find any others, I suck in a breath and open the purse.

I'm always a little wigged out at the thought of looking inside the purse. I don't know why. I guess I'm afraid I'll find something worse. Like nuclear missile codes or a murder weapon. Hell, I don't know. I wouldn't put anything past these guys.

Fouquet always comes and checks the purse when he shows up, though. I don't know why, but when he checked it again today, I started to get suspicious. Everything looks as it normally does, though. The five colorful folders are tucked into the center, dotted with sticky notes and tiny flags. A few loose flyers are inside, of local events and printed spreadsheets. Garbage information, all part of my cover. I even have an iPad with Wi-Fi disabled as part of my "businesswoman" shtick. There are lipsticks, pens, and a sanitary pad to make it look legit. I even have a few keys on a key chain, but they don't belong to anything that I know of. I ignore all that shit. Something's nagging me, and I think of the many bugs I've found in the room. I check the purse, pulling the folders out and setting them on the counter. Out go the papers, too. When the bag is empty, I run my fingers over the lining. I might just be paranoid.

I find another listening device, though. Not big. Not thick. Just a small, hard circle stuck in one corner behind the lining that tells me that nothing I say is safe, no matter how many bugs I remove from my room. Shit. I leave it there, so they won't know that I know it's there.

But now, I feel more trapped than ever.

I have to get out. It doesn't matter that I've got an hour before I meet my next contact. The room is stifling and unbearable at the moment, and I just want to get away. I grab the bag and check my wallet. It's got money in it because I am meeting these men at cafés and restaurants and other public places.

I'll go to one by myself. It won't matter because they can hear everything I say, right? A mirthless laugh escapes my throat, choked back by a sob. I want to fling the purse away from me and leave this place.

But since I can't . . . I'll just run from the hotel room instead.

• • •

Five minutes later, I'm walking down one of the busy Miraflores streets, looking desperately for a warm, friendly place to go. The district is pretty, but it's also busy. With my halting, barely remembered high school Spanish, I've been able to navigate the area. I'm getting fairly good at miming things such as *eat*, *money*, and *where's the potty room?*

I pass a café that looks too crowded to be comforting and pause by a street vendor with a bright blue umbrella over his fruits and snacks. Maybe . . . maybe I'll just walk for a bit instead of eating. But Fouquet and Duval are shitty captors and they forget to feed me half the time, and I'm starving.

When I'm not too anxious to eat, that is.

I contemplate a hot churro and pull out my wallet, when a man comes and stands next to me.

There's a saying that shoe salesmen notice everyone else's shoes. I guess I notice everyone else's hands because I'm a hand model. This man has nice hands. He's got a paper cup of coffee, and the fingers gripping it are long, tapered, but strong. Nice knuckles. His nails are well trimmed, too. The men that I have been meeting have bitten nails, short, jagged. Those are the signs of an anxious person. This man is not anxious.

He's safe.

He looks over at me, and gives me a dazzling smile. In perfect unaccented English he says, "Need a recommendation?"

An American! I nearly throw myself at him and not simply because of his smile. He's gorgeous. Thick, black hair, bronzed skin and a grin that could make panties melt from a hundred feet. And he's standing right next to me? At the worst possible moment of my life? I can't decide if this is the worst timing in the world or the best. "Just contemplating what I want to do about lunch," I tell him, my voice breathless. I don't know if it's fear or attraction that's making me all husky and soft-spoken but I don't care.

I clutch the Louis Vuitton bag under my arm tightly as he leans in. "I know a great place around the corner," he tells me. "Want company?"

CHAPTER THREE

RAFAEL

She is terrified.

The smile she so desperately tries to project trembles at the corners. And because I'm a sick fuck obsessed with her, I get hard. Granted it's not because she's scared witless, but because she's standing so close I could touch her. If I were her lover, I'd wrap my hand around her waist. I would tug her close, grip her shirt, and tongue her so deep she'd feel it in her toes. And since this is clearly a fantasy, the cars around us would keep moving past, the pedestrians would circle around us like an iceberg in the waters, and life would carry on uninterrupted.

It is only for me that the world would stop.

I shouldn't be here. I'm interrupting our task but I can't stand that she's afraid or that the asshole Fouquet has laid his hands on her.

"Company?" she repeats in an uncertain tone. "I don't know. I really shouldn't." Her soft lips have turned down and worry has crept into her eyes.

And what eyes. They are different colored—one deep brown and one brilliant green. With her pale perfect skin and her unique eyes, she's stunning to look at. It takes my breath away just to meet her gaze.

"Just for an hour? For a poor, lonely fellow American?" I give her my most winning smile.

Her own is shy, and some of the fear goes away. I'm glad to see that. She glances around weighing safety against her need to escape, her need for company. I worry she's going to decline, but she looks at me again, then nods. "Got a place in mind?"

I gesture at the café I just came out of. It's a French-style place but it serves food as well as coffee. As a bonus for Ava, the waiters are bilingual. "This one's nice and not too noisy."

She nods and ducks her head, stepping forward to go inside. I notice her grip on her bag is white-knuckled and tight. I move ahead to open the door for her, and she passes me as we go inside.

We grab a table at the back of the place, where it's quieter. I gesture for one of the waiters to come over and take our order.

She wilts into the chair beside me and pulls the purse into her lap. "Thanks. So you're American, huh?" She tilts her pretty head and the sun shines down on her makeup-covered bruise. She's done a good job covering it up but it's still visible. Under the table my hand clenches into a fist. At some point I'm going to take Fouquet into a private room and beat him until his teeth are falling out and he's crying for his mother. "What are you doing here in Lima?"

"Visiting family," I lie. "You?"

She blinks, as if taken aback. Maybe she doesn't have a lie prepared. "Um, vacation." Her hands clutch her purse. "Where are you from? Midwest?"

"Arizona." Does it matter that she knows the truth of where I grew up? It's not where I live now and I haven't been back to that town since I left for the army at age eighteen.

"I'm from Ohio. A—I mean, Lucy Wessex." She holds out her hand, the other clutched to her bag.

"Rafael Mendoza." I always use my real name. There are those who believe aliases are necessary in this business, but a great deal of my success rests upon the fear that my name raises in the stomachs of my opponents. That fear often buys me precious seconds of hesitation. But it's clear she's never heard of me.

And why would she? Before she fell into Duval's grip, she was a model—although none of our research revealed any print or digital ads, unlike that of her roommate, Rose, who walks the runways in Paris, Milan, and New York.

I can't figure out why anyone would find Ava's creamy beauty lacking. Maybe Ava's lush rack and bubble butt prevent her from being the clothes hanger that fashion demands. Whatever the case may be, Ava is starring in all my fantasies now. It's Ava's hot ass that I'm palming as I drill into her and it's her dark hair that I have clenched in my hand as I pillage her body.

"Coffee?" I raise my hand to get the attention of a waiter again but it's unnecessary.

A dark-haired, skinny man-child appears at her elbow and bends low because he's been admiring what I can't stop thinking about. "What would the lady like to drink?"

"Coffee is fine." She gives him a brief flick of a smile.

"Nothing else?" he queries.

"You should eat," I say gruffly. She hasn't eaten much over the last two days. Fouquet is responsible for bringing her things, and other than the purse and one small bag of food, she's been largely without.

"I'm not hungry," she says, but an unladylike rumble betrays her.

"We'll have a charcuterie plate," I order. I hold up my hands about two feet apart. "A big one. You guys have that, right?"

The waiter scuttles with the order, leaving Ava alone with me.

She bites her plump lip and gives me a hesitant look. "Thanks for the food, but you shouldn't have done that."

Is she worried about the money? Duval probably hasn't given her a dime. "I would've ordered it anyway. The serving portions here wouldn't keep a bird alive."

She smiles, a quick twist of her lips, as if she knows that there's nothing good about her current circumstances but still can't keep her humor to herself. Every part of my body responds to hers so if she smiles, then I'm smiling, too, even though she's neck deep in Duval's plans to auction off information that could put an entire country at his disposal and I'm here to steal that information.

"You look bigger than a bird."

I suppress the instinct to flex but it's an effort. She speaks and I want to know how high I should jump and whom I should pound on the way down to make her life easier.

"Hence the big board of food."

"Can I make a confession?"

Yes, please. Her soft-voiced question strikes me low and, predictably, I react. At least I'm sitting down and the table is covering my growing wood. "Sure."

"I don't like Peruvian food." She grimaces. "I can't recognize half of it."

“I’ll eat all the weird-looking shit for you.”

She grins wide and I’m slayed. Holy fucking shit. There’s the smile I knew she was capable of. That smile is enough to power the entire city for one friggin’ night.

“No rain today,” she says lifting her head.

“Yes, it’s beautiful.” We both know I’m not talking about the weather.

She gives me a wry look. “That’s kind of cliché, isn’t it? Something a guy would say to a girl in a Nicholas Sparks movie?”

“I wouldn’t know. Haven’t seen a movie of his but this is Lima. It’s not exactly Paris.”

Her smile turns wistful. “I kind of wish I was in Paris.”

“I’ll take you,” I volunteer immediately. “Say the word and I’ll have you riding the elevator at the Eiffel Tower. You just tell me when.”

Those round cheeks of hers pinken, and it makes her strangely colored eyes even brighter. “Mr. Mendoza—”

“Call me Rafe.”

“Rafe,” she says, and my dick gets hard just the way she rolls my name around on her tongue. “I appreciate the offer but . . . now is really not a good time for me. Personally. Please don’t be offended.”

She’s trying to let me down gently. The look on her face is troubled and sad. And just like that, I go from giddy with lust to sober again. She’s not here for fucking fun. She’s here because she’s in danger and I’m distracting her, like a dick.

I need to get my business concluded. I tug my ball cap down and shift slightly away. I wonder what the keywords are, the secret mission code words to get her to open her purse and show me the sample.

“Why did you say you were in Lima again, Lucy Wessex?” That’s a shit fake name. She doesn’t look anything like a Lucy Wessex, which brings to mind a perky blonde from Connecticut whose daddy runs a hedge fund and whose mom, Muffin, bangs the tennis pro.

“I’m, ah, on vacation.”

“Been to the beach?” I’m picturing her lush figure in a tiny bikini.

“Not yet.” She looks sad. “Been too busy. I do love the beach, though.”

“I’d love to take you.”

She shifts uncomfortably. “Maybe I should go.”

Shit. I’ve been too forward. My hand shoots out to grasp hers. “No,” I practically shout at her. I take a deep breath and then manage to blurt out a few words to make me sound less like a madman. “No, please stay. I’m enjoying the company.”

Her skin feels like silk under mine. I’ll dream about this tonight. It’s not lust that I feel for her. I know what

lust is. I've felt it every day since my cock hardened as a boy and I spilled into my sheets. This is fever, burning, life-changing mania. I want her more than I have wanted anything in my life. But that want will never be satisfied. I know this and still I linger over her skin. And worse? Worse, she allows it. I withdraw slowly, stealing one more moment of pleasure.

I hear a tiny hitch in her breath as I withdraw, as if she liked my touch, but since I'm a big, scary motherfucker with calluses on my hands, I know I've dreamt that sound up. But I pack it away with my other memories. I've gotten a good close look at her. I know what she sounds like—husky and warm. I've inhaled her clean scent and touched her satin-smooth skin.

It's not much for other men, but for me? It's more than enough.

"I have to go somewhere soon," she admits. Her hand pulls from mine and goes protectively to the purse in her lap. I've seen her take that damn thing everywhere, even into the bathroom in her hotel room. It's clear that's the information she's supposed to share. It's clear I should be thinking about it and how to get it from her.

But all I can think about are her soft hands. "At least stay to help me eat the mammoth pile of food I just ordered."

Her grin flashes again, and a small chuckle escapes her throat. "Can we eat fast?"

"We will throw down," I promise. "Like wild animals."

AVA

Rafael Mendoza is utterly charming. God, I wish I were here in Lima on vacation, like I said. I wish I were a carefree model that could pick up a beautiful man on a street corner and think this could go somewhere.

But I keep thinking about the meeting that's going to take place shortly. I check my watch. In a half hour, I have to be at an entirely different café, meeting an entirely different man. The man the red folder is for.

I'm a little too fascinated by Rafael Mendoza, though. His manner throws me off. It's the cagey way he answers my setup questions, like he's more interested in watching me than what I'm going to say. That should worry me right there, but for some reason, it makes me feel . . . I don't know. Protected? Maybe it's because of his hands. It's those nice fingers, and the calluses on his palms. I actually don't mind calluses on a man's hands, because they tell me a lot about a guy. They tell me he's used to working with his hands. That he's not afraid of getting dirty. That there aren't the accompanying rings of dirt under those well-trimmed nails tells me that he's also fastidious.

He's also devouring me with his eyes, like watching me is more filling than eating that plate of meats and cheeses in front of us.

He watches me eat a few slices of meat and cheese, and then that grin tugs across his face again as I lick my lips. For a moment he looks rakish and utterly sinful. "Tell me about yourself, Lucy Wessex?"

I'm utterly flustered at that. What can I tell him that is safe? Private? "Oh, I'm pretty boring."

"I shouldn't think so." He nudges the cheese knife at his side toward me.

I blink and look at the charcuterie plate in front of us. I'm eating, wolfing down food, but he's not touching it. Didn't he say he was hungry? Why is he not eating? He's just . . . watching me. Like a hawk. Or a

predator.

This is starting to feel like a trap. My heart pounds. “I . . . I think I need to leave.”

Again, his hand touches mine. “Stay. Please.” He gestures at the food. “You’ve hardly touched it.”

My stomach is rumbling, but I’m no longer hungry. There’s something off about this. Something too watchful about Rafael Mendoza. He’s giving me mixed vibes and I don’t know what to think. “I really do need to go.”

“Will I see you here again?” he asks. Again, he nudges the knife toward me.

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